

# The cycle of violence and pathways to peace

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes inter-group conflict through the lens of Terror Management Theory and explains how belief systems can breed animosity and hostility towards those who do not share one's beliefs. Research provides support converging with historical analyses suggesting that many of the same psychological mechanisms that lead terrorists to take aggressive actions may also motivate extreme counter-terrorist policies creating massive amounts of collateral damage. This collateral damage from violent counter-terrorist measures often intensifies the cycle of violence by assisting terrorists in recruiting support. Finally, recent research that provides hope for breaking the cycle of violence is presented.*

## Keywords

terrorism  
death  
humiliation  
terror management  
peace

World leaders commonly respond to violent terrorist acts in kind with hard-line violent military action without regard to the old adage that violence begets more violence. More than a mere folk saying, this wisdom has been repeatedly supported empirically through laboratory research (e.g., Button 1972; International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement, 2005; Widom 1989) and historically through observations of 'real-world' conflict. Bergen and Cruickshank (2007) recently reported that since United States President George W. Bush declared war on terror in September 2001, terrorist attack-related deaths have risen from 501 to 1689 per year. Similarly, Paley (2007) recently reported that the total death toll for American soldiers in Iraq is higher in 2007 than in any previous year since the American invasion. Unfortunately, this landmark death toll was reached with two months remaining in the year, indicating that the former high water mark of American deaths is likely to be far surpassed. Taken together, this research suggests not only that violence does indeed beget more violence, but also that political leaders seem undeterred by the mounting loss of life on both sides resulting from their violent policies.

This article first reports evidence suggesting that this fatal cycle of violence is motivated, in part, by existential concerns and our human needs to live a meaningful life and feel valuable. From a terror management

perspective (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon 1986), we argue that many acts of violence are driven primarily by symbolic concerns rather than concrete or instrumental issues. More specifically, while most conflicts are motivated in part by concrete concerns such as geographic territory or economic gain, most also carry a symbolic, cultural component that in many situations supersedes concrete concerns (see Pyszczynski, Motyl and Abdollahi 2007; also see Pyszczynski, Rothschild, Motyl and Abdollahi 2007; Rothschild, Motyl and Pyszczynski 2007). After introducing theory and evidence that lays out the symbolic forces motivating this cycle of violence, we present recent research suggesting possible avenues to curtail some of the escalating violence and pursue more harmonious inter-group relations. This research is then linked to real world public policy interventions supported by historical instances of the successful implementation of these peace-promoting strategies for change.

### **Terror management theory**

TMT stems from the assumption that for human beings a psychological conflict between internal drives and self-reflective knowledge necessitates a defensive effort to bypass this basic anxiety producing conflict. On the one hand, TMT proposes that humans have an instinctual desire for life and self-preservation. However, unlike other living things, humans are uniquely aware of the inevitability of death. This awareness creates the potential for incredible anxiety that could induce paralyzing, existential terror. To combat this potential for anxiety, people adhere to socially constructed worldviews in an attempt to imbue life with meaning and create the possibility that they may transcend their worldly death either literally, by being granted entrance into an eternal paradise, or symbolically, through societal remembrance through memorial statues or acclaimed awards (e.g., Nobel Peace prize). However, simply having a system of orientation that gives life meaning may not be enough to stave off the anxiety-inducing realization that all people will inevitably perish. People must believe that they are valued members of their culture and that, upon their death, will be granted their desired death-transcendence. People who live in accordance with the prescriptions for proper living set forth by their culture have this sense of value, called self-esteem. Together, faith in cultural worldviews and self-esteem permit people to maintain a sense of psychological equanimity in the face of knowledge of the inevitability of their demise.

These propositions have been tested in over 350 experiments conducted in 16 different countries using an assortment of hypotheses and testing methodologies. Research has demonstrated that when thoughts of mortality are made salient people display greater preferences for others who belong to similar groups and share similar values. Conversely, reminders of death also lead people to display increased aggression and dislike for people who do not belong to similar groups and do not share similar values (McGregor et al. 1998; Greenberg et al. 1990). In one line of research, Rosenblatt et al. (1989) revealed that when people were

induced with thoughts of death, they became more punitive of people who behave in ways inconsistent with cultural and moral norms. Thoughts of death have been shown to affect a number of other attitudes and behaviors such as close-relationships, prosocial behaviour, nationalism, prejudice, risk-taking and self-esteem striving (Cohen et al. 2004; Dechesne et al. 2000; Florian and Mikulincher 1997; Greenberg et al. 1997; Landau et al. 2004). Other TMT hypotheses have demonstrated that temporarily boosting self-esteem reduces anxiety in response to threats and also reduces the accessibility of thoughts of death. The converse is also true. Threatening self-esteem increases the accessibility of thoughts of death, which can lead to an increased need to defend one's cultural worldview and strive to gain self-esteem (Greenberg, Solomon and Pyszczynski 1997).

Of particular relevance to the terror management perspective on terrorism is the notion that cultural worldviews are fragile social constructions that must be continually and consensually validated for them to maintain their efficacy as death-anxiety buffers. Pyszczynski et al. (1996) interviewed people in front of a funeral home or 100 meters away from the funeral home and revealed that those participants interviewed in front of the funeral home estimated that a greater number of people shared their views. Another implication of this need for consensual validation has been examined by presenting participants with alternative, threatening worldviews. Schimel et al. (2007) gave participants essays that were either very pro-evolution and anti-creationism or pro-creationism and anti-evolution and found that participants reading the essays contrary to their personal views displayed increased thoughts of death. This finding suggests that the existence of alternative worldviews is threatening because they challenge the validity of one's own cultural worldview. If one's cultural worldview is wrong, its adherents may fail in their efforts to attain some sense of immortality.

Anything that questions the correctness of a group's particular cultural worldview, such as the existence of alternate worldviews, is a cause for increased death-anxiety and often leads to efforts to defuse this threat. TMT suggests that one strategy that groups use to defuse the threat posed by others with alternative worldviews is to assimilate other groups into their own, which both eliminates the threat and bolsters the belief in their own cultural worldview through increased consensual validation. However, some groups are invariably resistant to assimilation and conversion. In this case, those following one particular worldview will derogate those who do not share that worldview (Greenberg et al. 1997). By derogating different others, adherents of one particular worldview are able to affirm the validity and virtue of their own belief systems by belittling the opposing worldview. This is especially evident in mainstream culture's discussion of terrorists, which assumes that these worldview-threatening individuals must either be suffering from some extreme psychopathology, or are simply unenlightened individuals brainwashed by diabolical leaders (Pyszczynski, Solomon and Greenberg 2003). Likewise, terrorists also use these same

out-group derogation techniques, viewing their worldview threatening targets as heretical peons of a singularly evil empire (Huntington 1996; Lifton 1999). Finally, some worldviews may seem so threatening, that adherents of the threatened worldview are impelled to kill those following the opposing worldview. Pyszczynski et al. (2006) demonstrated that after priming American participants to think about death, they displayed increased support for the use of extreme military measures, such as nuclear weapons, to kill members of terrorist groups, even at the cost of killing thousands of innocent Middle Eastern civilians. In a parallel study conducted in Iran, priming Iranian students to think about death caused an increase in their support of using terrorist violence (e.g., suicide bombings) against the United States and other Western countries. Hirschberger and Ein-Dor (2006) provided evidence that Israeli college students and Gaza settlers respond to death reminders by increasing their support for aggressive treatment of Palestinians.

An especially relevant issue for explaining the increased terrorism in the Middle East in recent years is Landau et al.'s (2004) finding that priming terrorist violence (e.g., 9/11) increases people's death-related thoughts. As the TMT literature suggests, thoughts of death lead to increased aggression, hostilities and, in some cases, support for the destruction of other cultures. Thus, with Israelis and Palestinians suffering many lethal terrorist and counter-terrorist attacks per capita in recent years (Stern 2003) along with constant scenes of death in Iraq streaming in from every media outlet, TMT would predict that a cyclic escalation of violence would emerge, whereby each attack induces more death-related thoughts, which in turn produce more hostile attacks. Huntington (2002) reports that Muslims were responsible for eleven or twelve of the sixteen major acts of terrorism between the years of 1983 and 2000 (excluding acts of state-sponsored terrorism). The acts with perpetrators other than Muslims involve diffuse groups around the world in places with less salient levels of violence and death (e.g., Christian Identity terrorists in the United States bombing abortion clinics). Further, the number of Islamic terrorist attacks in 2004–2006 totalled three times that of the previous two years. Although this data does not suggest that the salience of death alone is responsible for increased violence this evidence does provide convergent support for the TMT hypothesis that regions plagued with death and destruction generate more terrorists and witness more terrorist acts.

### **The cycle of terrorist and counter-terrorist violence**

As has been conveyed elsewhere, there is no single origin of terrorism, nor any simple relationship between terrorist violence and any specific culture (e.g., Lifton 2003; Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski 2000). It is an intricate interplay of forces that leads any group of people to commit heinous violent acts towards others. Some of these forces are inevitably more important in motivating people towards the commission of terrorist acts than others. For instance, Tessler and Robbins (2007) surprisingly

revealed that economic status and religious affiliation are not significant factors in determining Arab approval of terrorist acts against US targets. Instead, they found that individual's attitudes about their own government and beliefs about US foreign policy represented the major predictors of support for attacks against US targets. Others have suggested that individual personality characteristics also play a role in determining who will support violence. Lifton (2003) suggested that fundamentalist thinking is one such trait that leads to increased aggressive actions against those who do not share a similar worldview.

Stern (2003) conducted ethnographic interviews with members of many terrorist groups from around the world and revealed several underlying themes consistent among terrorists. Most terrorists reported that they felt alienated and humiliated, and had a history of conflict with a particular group – often over a particular geographic territory. Theoretically, because this sense of humiliation can sensibly subsume the other motivational grievances it may be of the greatest relative importance in examining the root causes of terrorism. Lifton (2003) describes humiliation as among the most painful, and indelible of human emotions. From a TMT perspective, humiliation is a feeling that one's worldview has been belittled. This belittling undermines the death-denying efficacy of cultural worldviews and hence, precludes the humiliated from having self-esteem. Accompanying this great threat to one's death-denying, anxiety buffer are increased thoughts of death and an urgent desire to return oneself to a state of psychological equanimity.

The present conflict in the Middle East has been characterized by a number of these incidents in which one group sees itself as the target of humiliation. Although the objective reality of such events may be disputed, it is important to remember that the perception of subjugation and humiliation form the social reality for those involved. For instance, following World War II, Palestinians perceived themselves as having been suddenly evicted from a land which they viewed as their native soil for nearly two millennia so that the then aggrieved Jewish people would have their own homeland. And in 1967, the Jewish-Israeli state dealt a devastating defeat to the Muslim-Arab countries of Syria, Jordan and Egypt in just six days. In the ensuing decades, Israel has given Palestinians disjointed plots of land that lacked adequate water supplies and, albeit for myriad reasons, have installed military security posts in the middle of Palestinian neighbourhoods which reminded Palestinians of their occupation (Stern 2003). Adding to this frustration is the ever-increasing globalization and the development of US military bases nearby the sacred Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina (Lifton 2003). Most recently, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broadcast Western humiliation of Arabs to the world as Iraqis were videotaped being forced to perform fellatio on their fellow in-mates, being tormented by German shepherds, and being forced to wear women's underwear on their heads (Zimbardo 2007). Since the Abu Ghraib prison scandal came to light, there have been over 400 related military investigations

launched, suggesting that such incidents of humiliation may be more widespread than those outside of Iraq know.

It is, however, important to recognize that this cycle of humiliation and violence, far from a one way street, has been sustained by provocations from all sides. Since the establishment of the Jewish state in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Israelis have viewed themselves as a targeted community; surrounded by hostile parties that have continuously disavowed their legitimacy and vowed to destroy their very existence (e.g., Rouhana and Fiske 1995). Israelis live each day with the real possibility that death may be waiting for them on the next bus or falling from the sky in a Katyusha rocket. It is easy to see how the denial of one's very existence represents an ever-present humiliating and devastating threat to the sustaining power of one's worldview viability. Another example of the humiliation of the western world occurred on the 11 September 2001, when the United States of America, the last indisputable superpower on earth and a country that viewed itself as unassailable by even the greatest of foreign armies was shown to be impotent in the face of 19 men armed with nothing more than box cutters. In addition, the humiliation brought by this assault was made all the greater by the fact that its targets included the symbolic pillars of America's greatest power, its economic and military institutions. Sullied was America's fantastical view of itself as being an object of love and admiration by all the peoples of the world.

Large scale Gallup Polling of 10 Major Muslim countries (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) has supported the conclusion that humiliation is at the core of much of the conflict ('New poll of Islamic world says most Muslims reject terrorism', 2006). Although only a small minority of those polled (7 per cent) believed that the terrorist attacks against the United States were justified, this group of people have provided valuable insight into the mindset of Middle Easterners who do condone terror attacks. They indicated that they believed the attacks were justified because they feel that the United States, and the Western world overall, aim to dominate the Islamic world militarily and politically. These individuals also felt that the Western world disrespects Islam. Overall, this subset of the population believed that the United States and the West lacked goodwill for the Middle East.

Wessels (2006) provided convergent support for the present theorizing, the conclusions arrived at in Stern's (2003) ethnographic interviews, and the large scale Gallup Polling ('New poll of Islamic world says most Muslims reject terrorism', 2006). Wessels conducted small-group interviews with Afghans who were pro-Taliban and anti-Taliban. In this investigation, Afghans overwhelmingly indicated that the Iraq war was unjustified and led to a surge in funding and recruiting for terrorist groups. Further, many of those interviewed believed that the West aimed to dominate the Middle East and felt humiliated by the perceived injustice being committed against them. In Iraq, Wessels interviewed residents of Baghdad and found similar results. Many Iraqis viewed the fall of Saddam Hussein as bad because it further enabled Western dominance in the region. Of those interviewed,

most attributed problems of increased lawlessness, violence and rape as a direct result of the presence of the United States. Frighteningly, many of the boys interviewed claimed to have joined a jihad because of what the United States has done in Iraq. Taken together, many people living in the Middle East feel threatened, and in many cases, humiliated by the West.

Juergensmeyer (2000) conjectured that terrorism is one way for deeply humiliated groups to regain some of their sense of value that they perceived to have lost. The presence of humiliating groups such as the Israelis and some Western powers in the Middle East is likely making the humiliation of those involved with terrorist acts more salient. This increased salience of humiliation logically suggests that there should be a surge in efforts to defend against this humiliation. If, as Juergensmeyer suggests, terrorism is a way for humiliated people to redeem themselves, there should be an increase in terrorist acts as the humiliation becomes more salient. As reported by Mogahed, Pyszczynski and Stern (in press), in the years 2004–2006, there was a threefold increase in terrorist acts committed in the Middle East over the previous two years which directly paralleled the increased military presence of Western powers in the area.

Beyond being a concrete strategy of expelling foreigners, Lifton (2003) suggests that suicide terrorism is also socialized as a source of self-esteem and a way to gain status. Thus, for people struggling to gain self-esteem, they may sacrifice themselves in an attempt to be remembered as heroes who died courageously in the name of their community. In some cases, martyrs' families are rewarded monetarily and become more esteemed members of the community. This supports Becker's (1975) claim that individuals fight not for life, but for immortality. In this way, an act of devastating violence has become an alternative form of death-transcendence in these humiliated and largely powerless communities.

Bloom (2006) suggests that in fighting humiliation, suicide terrorism is a means through which the humiliated community can obtain a victory. The suicide terrorists lose militarily, but gain victories for their causes in the form of media coverage. Weinberg (2006) compares the activity of terrorists in Iraq to those of the Viet Cong in the Tet Offensive. Both offensives were military losses, but both garnered further support for their respective causes, military fame and are viewed by the perpetrators as moral victories (Weinberg). The Tet Offensive created the image of massive casualties in Vietnam and further added to the anti-war sentiment in the United States in the 1960s, abetting the Viet Cong in their goal of purging Vietnam of US soldiers. Similarly, the frequent terrorist attacks in Iraq provide an incessant stream of macabre images covered in the media on a seemingly daily basis, enabling terrorists to achieve a sense of symbolic immortality through public recognition and heroic infamy.

## **Pathways to peace**

The research presented thus far seems to paint a bleak picture of cultures involved in perpetual conflict. Optimistically, a small, but developing literature

has begun to emerge that suggests that support for violence and continued conflicts are not inevitable responses to existential anxieties. TMT suggests that people respond to existential concerns by affirming the values of their cultural worldviews and by striving to gain a sense of self-esteem by adhering to these worldviews. When confronted with alternative worldviews, we often respond defensively by derogating, and sometimes advocating violence against those holding those threatening worldviews. However, most modern worldviews share some prosocial values including tolerance and respect (Pyszczynski et al. in press). Ironically enough, many also share prohibitions against hate and causing physical harm against others. For example, consider the sacred texts of three of the major world religions. The Christian Bible proclaims, 'Be kind and compassionate to one another', (Ephesians 4: 32, NIV), the Muslim Koran states, 'Do good to others' (Imran 3.148), and the Hebrew Torah implores followers to 'beat their swords into plowshares' (Isaiah 2: 4, JPS). Similarly, multinational governing bodies such as the United Nations (UN) prescribe a number of prosocial values that are shared by 192 member nations. These values range from reducing infant mortality rates to ending the use of torture. If these values truly are cherished components of so many worldviews, one wonders how followers can so blatantly behave in contradiction to their proclaimed values. The problem therein is that worldviews include many ideas and values that do not perfectly fit together. Returning to the texts of the major world religions, one can easily find aggressive values that run in contradistinction to their other more compassionate values. The Christian Bible entreats adherents to seek vengeance by taking 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', yet to still to love thy neighbour. Again, the Muslim Koran urges followers to take 'a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose', yet calls for Muslims to 'do goodness because Allah loves those who do good'.

Much social psychological research reviews the power of contextual and situational factors in predicting behaviour (see Crano and Prislin 2006; Ross and Nisbett 1991; Zimbardo 1969). Different contexts prime different values and different types of responses to stimuli. Bargh (1996) demonstrated that when concepts are subliminally primed, people behave in ways consistent with those concepts. In one set of studies, Todorov and Bargh (2002) found that subliminally priming aggressiveness led participants to increase their aggression. TMT research has shown that death reminders increase people's strivings to live up to the salient standards of value prescribed by their worldviews. In an early study, Greenberg et al. (1992) found decreased hostility towards a person who held an existentially threatening worldview when the value of tolerance was made salient prior to a mortality salience induction. This study suggests that negative, hostile reactions are not inevitable when existential anxieties are salient.

### **Compassionate values**

Rothschild, Abdollahi and Pyszczynski (2007) recently conducted a series of studies investigating the possible effects of priming compassionate religious

values under conditions of mortality threat. In the first study conducted in the United States on a predominantly Christian sample, participants completed a measure of religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism measures the beliefs that one's religion holds clear and definite, fundamental truths about humanity and all those who do not share that belief are evil beings that must be fought (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992). Subsequently, participants wrote a short essay priming them to think about death or intense physical pain. Afterwards participants read and responded to a series of quotations of well-known compassionate Biblical values (e.g., loving thy neighbour as thyself, forgiving others and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you), neutral Biblical quotes unrelated to compassion taken from the Bible, or neutral quotes from non-religious sources. Last, participants completed a measure of support for extreme military action against Middle Eastern countries (e.g., killing thousands of innocent civilians to catch or kill Osama bin Laden). High levels of religious fundamentalism were strongly associated with strong support for military action except when high religious fundamentalists were primed to think about death and affirmed their compassionate values prior to the assessment of their support for military action. In this condition high fundamentalists became less supportive of extreme military action. This research suggests that death reminders lead high fundamentalists – people who place primary value on their religious beliefs – to more strongly adhere to those salient religious values.

In a follow-up study, the neutral Biblical passages condition was replaced with secularized versions of the compassionate Biblical values. Again, high fundamentalists were the most supportive of extreme military action against Middle Eastern countries, yet, after being reminded of death and having affirmed their religiously-labelled compassionate values they showed a significant decrease in support for military action. Interestingly, high fundamentalists did not respond to the secularized compassionate values after death. These findings suggest that it is not simply the nature of the value being affirmed, but also the authority of its source that determines the outcome of a value prime on actual behaviour. Another follow-up study replicated these findings in Iran among a Shiite Muslim sample. Instead of priming compassionate Biblical values and assessing support for military action against Middle Eastern nations, participants in this study were primed with compassionate Koranic values (e.g., 'Do goodness to others because Allah loves those who do good') that were religiously or non-religiously labelled and assessed on their anti-Western attitudes (e.g., 'We cannot trust the U.S. and its European allies; they are our enemies', and 'The U.S. and its European allies presence in the Middle East is threatening to our Islamic being; we should fight against them'). Again, death reminders increased anti-Western attitudes among Shiite Muslims in the non-religiously labelled value condition and decreased anti-Western attitudes in the religiously labelled compassionate Koranic values condition. Taken together, these studies illustrate how emphasizing the compassionate

values central to fundamentalists' belief systems may moderate aggressive responses, even under conditions when these individuals are normally compelled to act aggressively.

### **The value of recognizing our common humanity**

A variety of sources have suggested that perhaps if people viewed each other as sharing a common humanity with all other people, violence and hostility towards out-groups (i.e., groups different from one's own) would be substantially reduced. In addition to classic social psychologists such as Gordon Allport (1954) who proposed the possibility that humankind could be construed as one large in-group where prejudice was minimal, many non-academics have discussed the potential ameliorative effects of having people think of each other as all sharing a common humanity. For instance, former President of the United States John F. Kennedy once stated 'a rising tide raises all ships', while reggae music star Bob Marley reminded his listeners that 'we are [all] birds of a feather' ('Bob Marley Lyrics', 2007). In this age of science, some evidence even suggests that people really are members of one big family. The Human Genome Project ('Science behind the human genome project', 2007) recently reported that human beings share at least 99 per cent of their genetic material in terms of their nucleotide base pairs. In some instances, such as those mentioned above and some later discussed (e.g., anti-Apartheid activism), social movements reminding people that they share a common humanity have succeeded in attenuating inter-group conflict. There are, however, some instances where priming people of different cultures to think of their shared humanity have not caught on or worked effectively. For instance, the Esperanto movement to establish an international language and touted as a means to provide a common bond among people around the world. One possible reason this movement failed to promote peace and struggled to catch on may have been because of its artificiality and lack of a true cultural anchor (cf. Boli and Thomas 1999; Farb 1974). Although the Esperanto movement may not be accomplishing its goals of international peace, other instances that have been effective suggest that it may be worthwhile to explore the impact of reminding people that they share a common humanity. This scientific exploration could eventually provide some explanation as to why some of these social movements succeed whereas others fall short of their aims.

This line of thinking led Motyl et al. (2007) to conduct two studies testing the possibility that reminding people of their common humanity could reduce intergroup prejudice following a mortality reminder. In the first study, participants completed a short essay priming them to think about either death or dental pain and then viewed one of three different series of pictures. The first set included pictures of American families, the second included pictures of American individuals, and the third included pictures of international families – which were designed to induce people to think about their shared humanity. Afterwards, participants completed a common measure of implicit prejudice designed specifically to assess

anti-Arab prejudice. As expected, American participants who viewed pictures of American families or American individuals and were reminded of death displayed increased implicit anti-Arab prejudice. However, after viewing pictures of international families and being reminded of death participants displayed decreased implicit anti-Arab prejudice. In a follow-up study, American participants were again asked to think about death or another aversive topic and this time read short passages that were supposedly favourite childhood memories written by either American or international students. Following a short delay, participants' attitudes towards immigration were measured (e.g., 'Illegal immigrants are largely responsible for the dismal state of healthcare services in America today', and 'American citizens should be allowed to use lethal force to keep illegal immigrants out of our country'.) When primed with thoughts of death and reading about the childhood memories of Americans, participants displayed increased anti-immigrant attitudes. This prejudice-enhancing effect was completely erased when people read and responded to the childhood memories purportedly written by the international students. This second study also included a scale assessing the degree to which people perceived themselves as sharing a common humanity with people living around the world. This perception of sharing a common humanity with others mediated the effects of the death and childhood memories interaction on anti-immigrant sentiment. In a related line of research, Weise et al. (in press) demonstrated that activating thoughts about caring interactions with attachment figures also reversed the effect of reminders of death on support for violence. It may be that thoughts of caring attachment figures activated pro-social values, and perhaps further reminded people of their shared humanity, which directed their responses to fear in a more peaceful direction. It seems that the anxiety ameliorating effects of secure attachment relationships which are so important early in life remain a potent antidote to fear for adults as well, particularly when faced with a mortality threat. Taken together, these studies suggest that priming people with the sense that we all share a common humanity can reduce defensive and aggressive responses to mortality threats.

### **Promoting peace outside of the laboratory**

Numerous peace activists have preached a message suggesting that all people share a common lot in life and that when one member of a community suffers, the whole community suffers. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated this sentiment in his famed 'I Have A Dream Speech':

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

(Martin Luther King, Jr. 2007a)

Similarly, after the end of South African apartheid, former Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa and Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu promoted the philosophy of *ubuntu*, or the belief that ‘he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are’ (Tutu 1999: 31). In the years following the end of apartheid, Tutu was named the chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was designed to bring solace to all those who suffered during apartheid. Uniquely, this commission emphasized reconciling the conflicted parties rather than punishing the formerly oppressive and violent supporters of apartheid. From a TMT perspective, this approach was effective in reducing intergroup violence, rather than perpetuating it, because it emphasized all people’s shared humanity and dignity. This commission did not humiliate any of the parties involved and thereby did not create the common defensiveness following threats to one’s psychological structures. Whereas many people may think it absolutely necessary to combat terrorist violence with more violence, post-apartheid South Africa serves as an exemplar of a more effective approach to combating terrorism. Tutu admits this is a difficult approach, but the results have been inspiring. Since the end of apartheid and the adoption of this humanistic philosophy into the South African Constitution, the African National Congress – a governing body led by Nobel Laureate Nelson Mandela who was previously labelled a terrorist during apartheid – has committed no reported acts of terrorism (Tutu 1999).

In the cases of both Tutu and King, these advocates of peace were charismatic religious leaders who frequently reminded people of their compassionate religious values. Tutu frequently reminded people that they were all children of God. In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, he states that, ‘Never again will God’s children be humiliated . . . as if they were cattle’ (Tutu 1999: 15–16). Similarly, King emphasized the shared compassionate values of people of all different belief systems:

This call for a worldwide fellowship that lifts neighbourly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all mankind. This oft misunderstood, this oft misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man. When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am not speaking of that force which is just emotional bosh. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of Saint John: “Let us love one another, for love is God. And every one that loveth is born of God and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love.” “If we love one another,

God dwelleth in us and his love is perfected in us." Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day.

(Martin Luther King, Jr. 2007b)

Together, these two peace activists provide case studies showing the real-world efficacy of emphasizing people's shared common humanity (see Motyl et al. 2007) and compassionate values (see Rothschild et al. 2007). However, while most may be willing to admit that such sentiments could be effective for many people, how could such policies be used to reduce violence among the most extreme and violent of religious fundamentalists? Recently, Kruglanski (2007) reported that officials from Singapore and Saudi Arabia have implemented programs to reduce support for terrorist violence among extremists. In the first case, moderate religious clerics have been recruited to preach more peaceful interpretations of the Koran to fundamentalist believers in prisons. In the second case, peaceful activists have gone onto internet discussion boards advocating peaceful action. In both cases, those listening to the peaceful, compassionate messages have displayed declined support for terrorist ideologies. While only time will tell if such tactics are effective, these examples represent real world applications of the type of laboratory research presented in this article.

In addition to need for charismatic, compassionate leaders advocating peace, it is also important to address the root causes of terrorism. These leaders appear effective in reducing support for terrorist activities, but this assumes a pre-existing motivation towards terror. The above analysis suggests that feelings of humiliation play a major role in leading people to engage in terrorist activities. Therefore, in order to reduce the prevalence of and support for terrorism, humiliating acts must be reduced.

One source of humiliation is feeling that one's nation's sovereignty and autonomy has been violated. This sense can sometimes result from some hard-line (i.e., military) responses to terrorism. Sometimes military responses may be necessary, but it is essential to weigh the moral and military costs and benefits of a policy that targets enemies that live among innocent civilians. Many civilians in terror-stricken states have become terrorists after losing a family member or close friend because of a poorly planned military response to terrorism (Stern 2003). Thus, it is essential to minimize the loss of life among innocent people, more commonly referred to as 'collateral damage', when responding militaristically to terror threats. Furthermore, Zimbardo (2007) stresses the importance of maintaining human dignity and treating residents in occupied lands with respect. This point necessitates an avoidance of using cruel methods of torturing prisoners for any reason. Martin (2003) also emphasizes the importance of drawing connections between the terrorist attacks and military responses to the attacks in order to reduce the potentially humiliating feeling of having one's national boundaries violated.

Soft-line (i.e., diplomatic and policy-based) responses to terrorism are also vital in reducing the commission of terrorist activities and support.

Diplomatically speaking, Louis (2007) has presented evidence suggesting that using categorical thinking, stating that you are either 'with us' or 'against us', forces non-terrorist political opponents into the group labelled terrorists and precludes them from dissociating themselves from terrorist ideologies. Louis reports that this type of rhetoric increases non-terrorism-supporting political opponents' identification with terrorist groups. Social and political reforms should address some of the pervasive common causes of terrorism. For instance, in Middle Eastern countries, many residents believe that terrorism is a viable political option and that democracies are failed institutions. To stem the support for terrorists, reforms should include education about alternative approaches to making peaceful, non-terrorist political statements. In sum, emphasizing the efficacy of peaceful, international political activism may be most effective in attempts to reduce terrorism.

## Summary and conclusion

Human history is filled with many egregious acts of violence committed against fellow humans for a number of reasons. Although these acts may be partly motivated by concrete concerns, as we have presented above, these may also be motivated by symbolic concerns. Much research has documented manners in which inter-group aggression and conflict could be exacerbated, but recent research suggests that there are ways to counter this fatal defensiveness. From a TMT perspective, reminding people that they share a common humanity and hold similar compassionate values may be effective in reducing inter-group violence when existential issues are salient. From a more general perspective, governments and non-governmental organizations alike must consider the ramifications of their actions and attempt to treat all people with dignity and respect.

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